



DIREZIONE GENERALE OPERE DON BOSCO
Via della Pisana, 1111, C. P. 18333 - 00163 ROMA

Consigliere generale per la formazione

“The formation process of the Salesian Brother”

Pélföldszentkereszt, 18th October 2013

The present “Ratio” concerning the formation of Salesians was published in the year 2000. As time went by, it needed revision to meet new situations arising in the Congregation and urgent challenges in the area of formation. At the beginning of this six-year term, the Rector Major and the General Council decided not to produce a new “Ratio”, since the existing one still remained quite valid on the whole; it asked instead for a re-write of those parts that appeared to be insufficient.

Accordingly, in line with this decision of the Rector Major and the General Council, chapter 6 on the prenovitiate was rewritten in 2009; in January 2012 a new text was approved concerning the formation of Salesian Brothers; finally in July 2012 the guidelines for studies during initial formation were approved as a substitute for Appendix 3 of the “Ratio”. In collaboration with the Youth Ministry Department, guidelines were also approved in July 2011 on the “Aspirantate Experience” in continuity with the orientations of the “Ratio”, and of the prenovitiate in particular.

1. Reasons for revising the “Ratio”

We now ask ourselves why it became necessary to review the formation of Salesian Brothers and consequently to rewrite some parts of the “Ratio” connected with it. Here in brief are some reasons.

1. In the first place, it had become apparent for some time that the existing formation programme of Salesian Brothers was limited, uncertain and easily subject to improvisation. It therefore became necessary to offer the Provinces a clear and comprehensive programme of formation that would be on a par with the programme of formation for candidates to the Salesian priesthood.
2. In addition, there was a growing realization that very little attention was being paid to vocational discernment throughout the formation process: Brothers were being given hardly any experience and a very limited understanding of the lay dimension of their vocation; there was not much clarity about the criteria to be applied in distinguishing a vocation to the Salesian priesthood from that to the Salesian brotherhood; there were also frequent requests from Salesian Brothers asking to switch over to the priesthood.
3. It was also noticed that in some parts of the Congregation academic studies were not seen as important for Salesian Brothers; not many were convinced of the necessity of a theological and pastoral as well as a philosophical and pedagogical foundation for Salesian Brothers. These studies were in some cases more or less “tolerated”.
4. Finally, not much importance was being paid to the professional formation of Salesian Brothers; in fact, it did not even form part of their formation process. This led to a poor and uncertain sense of their identity and a weak impact of their work among the young.

In this context and with this awareness, when the 26th General Chapter introduced a new outlook on the Salesian Brother's vocation by highlighting the oneness of the Salesian consecrated vocation in its two forms, there was a feeling that the time had come to give Salesian Brothers a "quality formation" that would enable them to live their true identity as lay consecrated Salesians and meet the apostolic needs of the present day.

Accordingly, **paragraph 323 of the "Ratio"** was rewritten so as to offer an overview of the Brother's formation. It offers a summary of the changes that were introduced:

*"In all the phases of formation, account should be taken of the basic equality and of the differentiation due to the specific nature of the vocation of each person in formation. In particular: in the **prenovitiate**, the Salesian consecrated vocation is presented in its two forms, ministerial and lay, and also by meeting significant figures; in this way the prenovice can become better acquainted with the forms of the Salesian vocation and reach a first orientation, without arriving at a decision about them;*

*"in the **novitiate**, each novice under the guidance of the director of novices, carries out a process of discernment regarding both forms of the Salesian vocation, in order to arrive at a specific option for his future as a Salesian Brother or a Salesian Priest/Permanent Deacon; this discernment and vocational choice precede the request for admission to the first profession, in which it is necessary to express one's own vocational decision; in this process the Provincial is also involved;*

*"in the **postnovitiate** period, the Salesian Brothers with the help of their Rector and Provincial carry out a process of discernment with regard to the professional area in which they feel called to develop their own gifts and capabilities in response to the needs of the Province; in this phase they undertake two or three years of philosophical and pedagogical studies;*

*"having completed at least two years of philosophical and pedagogical studies, the Salesian Brothers begin or continue a period of **"technical, scientific or professional training"** for the purpose of acquiring a recognised "specific qualification,"¹ if possible before practical training;*

*"for **practical training** the Salesian Brothers are preferably placed in situations where they can exercise their professional qualification and assess the discernment undertaken in the postnovitiate regarding their future professional area;²*

*"the **specific formation** for the Salesian Brothers, as for the Salesian clerics, immediately follows practical training,³ it lasts for two years and is carried out in one of the regional or inter-regional centres approved by the Rector Major with the General Council;*

*"**preparation for perpetual profession** is done as far as possible, by the Salesian Brothers and the clerics together, before or during the specific formation;*

*"the **"quinquennium"** involves both the Salesian priests/permanent deacons in the first five years after their ordination and the Salesian Brothers in the first five years after their specific formation;*

*"after specific formation, at a suitable time, if necessary every Salesian Brother should have the possibility of completing some **specialization** in the specific field of his profession and in the skills needed to fulfil the various tasks and roles that will be entrusted to him. In this way he completes the professional qualification begun during the time of temporary profession."*

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¹ Cf. R 95.

² Cf. FSDB 442.

³ Cf. C 116, FSDB 479.

2. Contribution of the various stages to the Salesian Brother's formation

In this second part of my talk, I wish to lead you, step by step, through the new formation programme of the Salesian Brother, which is not limited to paragraph 323 of the "Ratio" but revisits and retouches all the formation phases; in this way you will be able to understand the practical and formative implications of what has been laid down in the revision of the "Ratio".

Prenovitiate

To the 26th General Chapter goes the credit of bringing about a change in our way of looking at and presenting the vocation of the Salesian Brother. The identity of our Salesian consecrated vocation is not primarily a matter of what we do but of who we are. We are consecrated persons who, called by God, have chosen to follow the Lord Jesus by giving ourselves completely to God in the service of the young after the example of Don Bosco - which service we carry out in two ways: as Salesian priests or as Salesian Brothers.

To help the Provinces present this perception of the Salesian vocation in the proper way, the Formation Department, in 2009, prepared and circulated some ready-made material in the form of 15 sessions for use in aspirantates and prenovitiates.⁴

Subsequently, in 2012, the Rector Major and his Council promulgated a curriculum of intellectual formation for initial formation. Among other things, it called upon prenovitiates to foster a knowledge of and love for Don Bosco, an awareness and appreciation of the Salesian Congregation in the world, and an understanding of and attraction to Salesian consecrated life in its two forms, the ministerial and the lay. Furthermore, the prenovices were to read the biographies of some outstanding examples of both forms of Salesian consecrated life.⁵

Significantly too the Congregation asked that on the team of formation guides of the prenovitiate "there be *at least a Salesian Brother* in order to enable the prenovices to have a direct knowledge of the two forms of the Salesian vocation".⁶

Thus, the new guidelines made it clear that in the early years leading up to the prenovitiate, all the candidates and prenovices are to be given a good knowledge and experience of the Salesian vocation in its two forms, but are not yet required to choose between Salesian priesthood and brotherhood. That decision is to be made later – during the novitiate.

All the foregoing changes are concerned with formation in the prenovitiate. But, they also affect the aspirantate and vocation promotion. The practice of some Provinces of having separate aspirantates for candidates to the Salesian priesthood and candidates to the Salesian brotherhood no longer seems valid today. And it is clear that in vocation animation a correct presentation of the Salesian vocation to the young must always include the Salesian priesthood and the Salesian brotherhood as two ways of living out the same Salesian vocation.

Novitiate

The novitiate is a time of intense formation and discernment. The new guidelines require every novice to clarify his own specific vocational orientation as a future Salesian Priest or as a future Salesian Brother before he makes his request to be admitted to profession; as a matter of fact, he must state his vocational decision in his application to first profession.⁷

⁴ FORMATION DEPARTMENT, *The Vocation to Salesian consecrated life in its two forms: Salesian brother, Salesian priest*, Rome 2009.

⁵ THE RECTOR MAJOR AND THE GENERAL COUNCIL, *Assessment and Guidelines concerning Intellectual Formation during Initial Formation*, Rome 2012, p. 4.

⁶ *Revision*, 345.

⁷ Cf. *Revision*, 323.

The novice director helps him to carry out this process of discernment, making use especially of the criteria expressed in “Criteria and norms”, numbers 84-87.⁸ The novice discerns whether, in the educative and pastoral work with the young, he has a greater propensity for “the specific qualities of his lay status, which make him in a particular way a witness to God’s Kingdom in the world, close as he is to the young and to the realities of working life”⁹ or for the “ministry, which makes him a sign of Christ the Good Shepherd, especially by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments”.¹⁰ In this process of discernment the Provincial is also involved.¹¹

To encourage a proper discernment and to highlight the Salesian consecrated vocation, if there is a custom of giving the Salesian clerics the cassock during the novitiate, this is deferred to the time of conclusion of the novitiate.¹²

Postnovitiate

The postnovitiate formation programme comprises a number of subjects like philosophy, pedagogy, Salesian studies, psychology, sociology and communication. Philosophy is the major subject; it enables one to use his reason to arrive at a deeper understanding of the person, his freedom and his relationship with the world and with God.¹³ The study of philosophy is not only for all candidates to the priesthood, but important also for anyone who wants to understand the postmodern thinking of the young, the relativism prevalent in many parts of the world, the issue of creationism versus evolution, and a host of many other current issues. That is why it is part and parcel of the formation of the Salesian Brother, who is called to be an educator of the young.

As things stand, in many postnovitiates of the Congregation, the postnovitiate formation is usually completed in the space of three years; some postnovitiates even have a fourth year. According to the new guidelines for the formation of Salesian Brothers, “the length of philosophical and pedagogical studies for the Salesian Brother during the postnovitiate ought to be at least two years. So as to allow a suitable time for professional qualification, in ordinary circumstances it is not convenient that he extend the philosophical and pedagogical studies of the postnovitiate for more than three years”.¹⁴

During the final year of the postnovitiate, each Salesian Brother postnovice, assisted by his Rector and the Provincial, carries out a discernment regarding the professional area in which he feels called to develop his gifts and capabilities in response to the needs of the Province: academic school, professional training, social communication, social work, different aspects of administration and management, etc.¹⁵

Technical, scientific or professional training

Immediately after the postnovitiate, the Brother is given an opportunity to engage in “technical, scientific or professional studies” to qualify himself in the profession he has chosen in his postnovitiate dialogue of discernment.¹⁶ Everything possible is to be done to ensure that the studies give the Brother a competence that puts him on a par with a lay person exercising the same profession in civil society.¹⁷

⁸ Cf. *Revision*, 371, 384.

⁹ C 45.

¹⁰ C 45.

¹¹ Cf. *Revision*, 323.

¹² Cf. *Revision*, 384.

¹³ Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, 2.

¹⁴ *Revision*, 425.

¹⁵ Cf. *Revision*, 323.

¹⁶ Cf. *Revision*, 417.

¹⁷ Cf. *Revision*, 409.

This step is something new in the Brothers' formation programme but it is not difficult to understand why it has been included. On the one hand, it does not seem correct that, following the previous formation programme, the Brothers have to go through all the various stages of their formation and make their perpetual profession without ever having had a serious and direct contact with the professional field, that is, with the lay aspect of their vocation. On the other hand, it seems obvious that, if the Brothers are to be educators among the young during their practical training, they need to have some training and qualification in the professional field.

I believe that on this point there is a lot of convergence in principle, but plenty of difficulty in practice. All this points to the need for each Province to devise a good and practical plan to ensure the professional training of its Brothers, if possible before practical training.

Practical training

From what has just been said about professional training, it follows that during practical training Salesian Brothers should preferably be placed in situations in which they can exercise the professional qualifications they have acquired. This also helps them to strengthen and verify their motives for choosing the lay Salesian consecrated vocation.

Specific formation

Specific formation is not an optional phase for Salesian Brothers; it is a part of their regular pattern of formation. Just as, after practical training, clerics immediately proceed for their specific formation, likewise Brothers, after practical training, immediately proceed for their specific formation.

Article 116 of the Constitutions says: "After practical training the Salesian goes on to complete his initial formation. The specific formation of a candidate for the priestly ministry follows the norms and directives laid down by the Church and the Congregation, and has for its scope the preparation of a priest who will be a genuinely Salesian pastor and educator. The specific formation of the lay Salesian offers him the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of the spiritual heritage of the Congregation. He receives an adequate theological preparation appropriate to his consecrated lay status, and completes his formation with a view to his subsequent apostolic work of education."

This article was promulgated in 1984, but for almost twenty years, the specific formation of Salesian Brothers did not materialize, in spite of a few attempts made here and there. In 2005 we took the initiative of organizing this formation phase for the Brothers. Today in all parts of the world there are six regional or inter-regional centres approved by the Rector Major and his Council for the two-year programme of specific formation for Salesian Brothers: at Manila in the Philippines for the Region of East Asia – Oceania; at Shillong in India for the Region of South Asia; at Yaoundé in Cameroon for the French-speaking Salesians of Africa, and at Sunyani in Ghana for the English-speaking; at Guatemala for the two Regions of the Americas; and at Turin for the three Regions of Europe. In addition, Turin also serves as an international centre, open to Salesian Brothers from all the Regions of the Congregation. Just as some clerics are sent to Rome or Jerusalem for their specific formation because of the particular advantages these places have to offer, so too Brothers can be sent to Turin for their specific formation for the advantages that derive from living at the holy places of Don Bosco.

The specific formation of Salesian Brothers is the response to a particular need: Brothers need to nourish their life on the Word of God; this implies a study of Sacred Scripture. The faith conveyed in the catechism taught in the prenovitiate and novitiate needs to be deepened; this is done in Theology, which is nothing else but a deeper understanding of the faith. There are many moral questions today that call for a good grasp of Catholic teaching about each of them; suffice it to mention a few like abortion, euthanasia, contraception, gay marriage and population control; this is

the field of Moral Theology. Educated Catholics today, including Salesian Brothers, need to be acquainted with the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church because it throws light on a wide variety of issues, like human rights, peace and justice, the morality of war, human trafficking, third world development and globalization. It is also important for Brothers to engage in a deeper study of the theology of consecrated life and of the process of growth in the spiritual life, and have a greater understanding of Salesian spirituality; at the same time, they must be better prepared for Salesian youth ministry, for communicating the faith through catechesis, and for a fruitful educative and pastoral involvement in the field of social communication.

For this phase there needs to be a separate community for the Salesian Brothers with their own Rector and formation staff drawn from the various Provinces. Besides, with the exception of Salesian studies, separate classes ought to be taken for the Brothers. The academic courses remain open also to other religious. The duration of the phase is generally two years.

Preparation for Perpetual profession

The preparation for perpetual profession does not consist in a course conducted in the last weeks before the profession itself, after the admissions have taken place. The “Ratio” says that it comprises “the process of discernment and verification prior to making a definitive option, including the application, admission and immediate preparation for the act of profession”.¹⁸ The programme of preparation may last a year or several months; it may be carried out in the ordinary course of practical training or specific formation by way of suggested activities, personal and group experiences, suitable guidance, etc.¹⁹ Ordinarily, this preparation is done by the Salesian Brothers and the clerics together.²⁰

During the preparation the confreres are invited to meditate once again on the Constitutions and on the fundamental themes of consecrated life; a competent and experienced spiritual guide is offered them to follow each individual and the group. In particular, all the Salesian clerics and Salesian Brothers are asked to pay careful attention to a discernment concerning the two forms, ministerial and lay, of the Salesian vocation in view of a definitive choice.²¹ Concretely speaking, this means that they verify their vocation in the light of their lived experience, mature a new personal synthesis of their motivations, and conclude their discernment with the decision to permanently embrace Don Bosco’s apostolic project as a Salesian Priest or a Salesian Brother.²²

In Provinces in which specific formation precedes perpetual profession, “this same careful discernment should be undertaken before the start of specific formation”.²³

“Quinquennium”

The first years of full involvement in pastoral work are especially important for the Salesian Priest and Brother because they pose new challenges and problems. “The transition from a directed and supervised life – such as that obtaining in formation communities – to full personal responsibility for one’s apostolic work generally entails a rearrangement of one’s life, an adjustment to a new pace of life and work, and calls for a new synthesis in one’s life”.²⁴ This is the time when some needs begin to be felt more strongly: self-affirmation, the quest for fruitfulness, personal initiative and creativity. Tension arises as one notices the discrepancy between what one learned

¹⁸ FSDB 503.

¹⁹ Cf. FSDB 507.

²⁰ Cf. *Revision*, 323.

²¹ Cf. *Revision*, 512.

²² Cf. FSDB 504.

²³ Cf. *Revision*, 512.

²⁴ FSDB 532.

and what one actually finds in daily life. There may also be a feeling of inadequacy for one's new roles and responsibilities, with consequent feelings of frustration and disaffection.²⁵

Accordingly, each Province chooses the ways in which it intends to accompany and help its young Priests and Brothers in their first five years of insertion in the educative and the pastoral work of the Province after their specific formation. It devises particular initiatives and programmes in which both Priests and Brothers take part together. In this connection there are also initiatives and programmes at the level of the Region.

Specialization

As we have seen, specialization or professional qualification is different from specific formation. At a suitable time after his specific formation, every Salesian Brother, as a rule and according to need, "should have the possibility of completing some specialization in the specific field of his profession and in the skills needed to fulfil the various tasks and roles that will be entrusted to him. In this way he completes the professional qualification begun during the time of temporary profession".²⁶

In my letter on the qualification of the confreres,²⁷ I have warmly recommended that the Provinces have a plan for the qualification of their confreres, that it correspond to the needs of the Province and that it take into account the abilities and inclinations of the confreres. Without qualifications it is not possible to ensure the quality of Salesian communities and of their educative and pastoral work.

Ongoing formation

In addition to the personal, community and provincial initiatives of ongoing formation, I would like to point out something that the Regions are doing: over the course of a six-year period they hold one or two regional Congresses on the Salesian Brother, to which they invite also Provincials, provincial formation and youth ministry delegates, formation personnel and others... One could perhaps consider holding also a European Congress.

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3. Expected results

What are the *results* expected from this revision of the Salesian Brother's formation? I shall not dwell at length on this point, because you can find a longer treatment of the subject in the guidelines appearing in the Acts of the General Council at the beginning of the previous six-year period.²⁸

It is my hope that in the Congregation there matures a greater awareness and a clearer understanding of the identity of the Salesian Brother; further, I am hopeful that we shall be able to offer a "quality formation" to Salesian Brothers; I feel confident that in our vocation animation we shall be more committed to promoting this vocation within the framework proposed by the GC26, that is, of a single Salesian consecrated vocation in two forms; finally, I expect a new kind of insertion of the Salesian Brother in our educative and pastoral communities in a way that enables

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Revision*, 323.

²⁷ The letter is dated June 4, 2012 and is addressed to Provincial and Provincial Formation Delegates.

²⁸ F. CEREDA, *The care and promotion of the vocation of the Salesian Brother*, in: AGC 382, Rome 8 June 2003.

him to offer his own specific contribution within our works and makes him in this way a visible sign of the consecrated vocation among the young.

What I have presented to you is an overall picture of the formation of the Salesian Brother today in the Salesian Congregation. All that now remains to be done is to bring about a change of mentality and practice in the life of the Provinces, beginning with the revision of the *Formation section of the Provincial Directory*.